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## Finding and Choosing a Supervisor

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## **Abstract**

*Finding and choosing the right supervisor is an essential task for students about to embark on a PhD program. In this paper the authors discuss the students' and supervisors' expectations of professional supervisor-student relationships. Students will expect that their supervisors guide them in a customized/tailored way; are available when needed; are open, supportive, reliable, trustworthy, clear in the relationships, and friendly; are constructively critical; have a good knowledge of their research area; structure tutorials so that ideas can be exchanged relatively easy; have sufficient interest in their research; and are sufficiently involved in their success to help them get a good job. Supervisors will expect that their students are independent and interested in the research; produce work that is more than a first draft; report all relevant issues when discussing the research with them in regular meetings; and follow the advice that has been agreed upon in a meeting. Throughout the paper the authors draw upon their own experiences as students and later supervisors.*

**Keywords:** PhD program; student, supervisor; supervisor-student relationship; finding and choosing; expectations.

## **Introduction**

For students, who are about to embark on a PhD program, one of the most important tasks is finding and choosing the right supervisor who is also frequently referred to as a tutor. This is certainly not an easy task, but it is, however, one task that is key to how successful the students will be in conducting their research, performing in courses, publishing conference papers and journal articles, and, as a result, navigating their way through the whole PhD program. We find supervisors outside the university world, too. For example, in the corporate world such supervisors are known as mentors. The responsibilities of supervisors, tutors, and mentors are very similar, namely overseeing the progress of individuals, but not controlling them. The distinction between overseeing and controlling is an important one, as individuals are expected to be pro-active and to show creativity. As we shall see shortly, the two main roles that supervisors, tutors, and mentors play are that of administration and of interpersonal

relationships. In the following we aim at giving a broad overview of what prospective PhD students should consider when finding and choosing their supervisors.

In this paper we discuss the students' and supervisors' expectations of professional supervisor-student relationships. Drawing upon the literature and our own experiences as students and later supervisors, we do this by presenting a list of 'shopping items' that each student should critically evaluate before choosing a supervisor.

### **The Supervisor's Different Roles**

Some students believe that they do not need a supervisor, but they should think again, though, as we all need supervisors (Blaxter, Hughes, Tight, 1996). For example, the supervisors themselves seek the advice of their colleagues on how to improve the quality of a research publication. Many of the articles published in academic journals are testimony to the importance of supervision, as evidenced by the fact that the authors thank colleagues for having reviewed the article. It would seem natural to ask why it should be any different for students who are just about to start their research career?

At some institutions it is not possible that the students themselves find and choose their supervisors. Instead they are simply allocated their supervisors – perhaps, or perhaps not, with the qualities that they as students are looking for! At other institutions, however, the students are free to find and choose the people they want as supervisors. This is equally true for the thesis committee and its members who frequently support the students and the supervisors. By contrast, most often students cannot choose their examiners although in some cases they can suggest examiners whom they think are appropriate.

For many universities in the United Kingdom it is generally the case that throughout the PhD program students will report to their first supervisors and a thesis committee. At the time of the *viva voce*, the students are examined by an internal examiner (who has not supervised them during their research) and an external examiner; the examination takes place in a private defense. If the student is a member of the academic staff the number of external examiners is increased to two. However, there are different expectations of the number of supervisors, thesis committee members, and examiners in different countries. For example, in Denmark, PhD student are examined by three external examiners; the examination takes place in a

public defense (Lindgreen, Vallaster, and Vanhamme, 2001). In Belgium a thesis committee can be composed of up to six people; it is usually the case that three of these members come from the student's own university. All of the committee's members act as examiners at the public *viva voce* that follows the private defense (Lindgreen, Vallaster, and Vanhamme, 2001). Yet students in the US can shop around for both a supervisor and a topic during the first several years of the PhD program, and in a typical five-member thesis committee some members often come from outside the faculty or university (Beatty, 2001).

In addition to supervisors, thesis committee members, and examiners it is common practice at many universities that PhD students are provided with a personal tutor (from the academic staff) and/or a peer mentor (a fellow student) who can help with informal advice and information (Cryer, 2000). Students can discuss matters that are of concern to them with these people knowing that they can do so in absolute confidence. Often there is also an individual who has a general responsibility (administrative and pastoral) for the PhD students.

Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight (1996) recommend that students try to get people involved whom they believe to be knowledgeable about the research or who can help in other ways, either formally or informally. It is a good idea to arrange that the members of the thesis committee have complementary skills, for example, accessibility, communication skills, research skills (e.g., quantitative and qualitative skills), practice, reputation, network, and knowledge of university processes. Some PhD students wish to have academic from other universities as members of the thesis committee, as this can generate some exciting opportunities. For example, such academics may invite the students to spend a semester at their universities and work on their research. The students naturally benefit from such visits not only because they meet colleagues within their chosen field, but also because it is often a requirement that candidates have had experiences from different universities if they wish to take up a position with a university after having finished their PhD program.

It is advised that PhD students sit down and reflect over the qualities, which they would like from their supervisors. It should be added that it is probably unlikely that one particular supervisor has all the desired qualities (Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight, 1996).

We believe that students can reasonably expect their supervisors to:<sup>5</sup>

- Guide them in a customized/tailored way.
- Be available when needed.
- Be open, supportive, reliable, trustworthy, clear in the relationships, and friendly.
- Be constructively critical.
- Have a good knowledge of their research area.
- Structure tutorials so that ideas can be exchanged relatively easy.
- Have sufficient interest in their research.
- Be sufficiently involved in their success to help them get a good job.

With the requirements placed on supervisors, it is not surprising that they also have expectations of their the PhD students who:<sup>6</sup>

- Should be independent and interested in the research.
- Ought to produce work that is more than a first draft.
- Must report all relevant issues when discussing the research with the supervisors in regular meetings.
- Follow the advice that has been agreed upon in a meeting.

If the supervisor and student fail to deliver on these expectations the student will face personal, professional, and organizational problems (Wisker, 2001). For example, the student, who did not consider the likelihood of barriers to communication and differences in opinion on how the research should be conducted, would later clash with the supervisor. Another student who believed that the supervisor had sufficient knowledge in the area of research discovered only too late that this was not the case. Yet a third student, who thought that it would not be necessary to check how the supervisor managed his research group, later found out that with many students in the group there was too little supervision, and there was also little provision of financial support and equipment. The result was that all three students dropped out of their PhD programs! Throughout the rest of the paper we will discuss the students' expectations of their supervisors, and the supervisors' expectations of their students.

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<sup>5</sup> The shopping list draws upon the literature (Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight, 1996; Cryer, 2000; Lindgreen, Vallaster, and Vanhamme, 2001; National Postgraduate Committee, 1995; Phillips and Pugh, 1994; Rudestam and Newton, 2001; Salmon, 1992; Wisker, 2001), as well as the authors' own experiences.

<sup>6</sup> The shopping list draws upon the literature mentioned in footnote 5. .

### *To guide them in a customized/tailored way*

Topic and length of research: Supervisors should oversee that the students stay focused and achieve their research goals. One of the first meetings - which in general should not be *ad hoc* chats, but must be meetings that have been properly timetabled for both parties - should be concerned with the topic of student's PhD research. Baker (2000) notes that comparatively little attention has been given to writing a research proposal, which many students find difficult. The supervisor will be able to help the student with advice on the scope of the research and how to focus it so that it becomes suitable for a PhD degree. There is no universal requirement as to the length of a PhD thesis: for example, in Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom a typical thesis totals 500 pages, 100 pages, and 350 pages respectively, whereas in Denmark it is becoming increasingly popular to submit a collection of papers, which have been published as part of the research, together with a 50-page summary of the research. There are advantages to the latter model, as the students will write up the literature review, methodology, and findings as they proceed with their research, and they will receive valuable feedback when they submit the papers. The disadvantage is that with review and publication delays it may be difficult not to exceed the three-four year period a PhD program usually takes. Interestingly, at universities in the United Kingdom only academic staff are allowed to follow the Danish model. Baker (2001) has provided many pieces of advice on how to write up and get published.

Indeed, one part of a supervisor's role is to make sure the PhD student actually finishes the PhD program, and the setting of deadlines therefore becomes important. Although this task really is the student's own responsibility it is being done in cooperation with the supervisor who has more experience on time commitments. Some students believe that the PhD research is overwhelming, while others underestimate the time to completion. One of the authors had to revise his completion schedule several times. This was not due to external commitments or failure to meet deadlines, but was the result of the richness and complexity of the research. At a later stage, this author became more experienced and began to set reasonable deadlines and targets, which could be met. Students, who are unrealistic about their progress, can lead their supervisors to make or forgo commitments that they would otherwise undertake. The more honest the students are in reporting their progress, the more help the supervisors can provide by way of assistance, clear advice and guidance, or clear deadlines and targets. Finally, although supervisors would be expected to know the rules and regulations that could affect

their PhD students' program the students should also actively seek this information themselves.

Time, costs, resources, and support: Other issues, which could be addressed in a first meeting, include the time available for the PhD research, and the cost of the PhD research and overall program, as well as the resources (e.g., material, financial, people, and skills resources) and support (e.g., personal and emotional support) that the student can draw upon (Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight, 1996; Cryer, 2000). Some supervisors have significant funding for PhD students, while others have very little. At the very least we believe that full-time students could expect full support in relation to the cost of the research, and reasonable office space and access to resources such as a computer, printer, photocopier, and telephone, as well as a well-stocked library and online databases. Unfortunately, when this does not happen it becomes difficult to carry out good research. Some universities fully fund their PhD students for the entire program, which means that the students work either as a research assistant or teaching assistant (Beatty, 2001). Some supervisors can help their students to obtain a scholarship (from the government) that covers tuition fee, costs of conducting the research and participating in conferences, and a monthly salary, with the sole obligation of having to be active in the PhD program (Lindgreen, Vallaster, and Vanhamme, 2001). Other supervisors may help landing a consulting contract that provides the students with an income but, of course, takes time away from the essential thing, which is doing the PhD program. Some students opt for collaborative research where they receive a salary from an employer who may also contribute to the costs of the PhD research and program. Such a collaborative research can be of great financial help to the student with program fees running at approximately £3,000 at a typical university in the United Kingdom. (Students outside the EU have to pay about three times this rate.) A disadvantage of collaborative research is that the supervisor may consider the research topic unsuitable for a PhD despite the opinions of the employer (Cryer, 2000).

Meetings: In the early stages of the PhD program, meetings probably take place once a fortnight and last for one hour. The number and frequency of meetings will depend on the written regulations of the university and on the particular supervisor and student who at times may prefer a flexible schedule. Meetings can be person-to-person or through mail, e-mail, telephone, or fax, which is often necessary if the student is away from the university. Students should be prepared to engage their supervisor in the meetings, to question advice, object when



necessary, but more importantly to discuss the work at hand, the potential problems and concerns they might have, and methodological and theoretical issues that are important. The purpose of doing a PhD is not just to take down everything that the supervisor says in a meeting. For example, one of the authors had a meeting to identify potential cases for the thesis. While wanting to draw on the knowledge of the supervisor, this author also came prepared with a list that identified the criteria for inclusion and exclusion, plus some suggested names of cases and strategies for gaining access. As a result, the supervisor was clear about what the student wanted and why, and could identify important cases that did turn out to be theoretically rich.

The timescales that academics work to tend to be fairly extended and it is not uncommon, particularly for senior professors, to have their diaries booked months in advance. One of the author's supervisors had literally booked his diary one-two years in advance. This is, however, not a general rule, and most of the authors could meet with their supervisor within a month, or even at a shorter notice in cases of emergency. A supervisor's time is a scarce commodity and as it is the student's PhD rather than the supervisor's, maximum value needs to be obtained. Meetings should be scheduled well in advance, and whilst supervisors inevitably have many other things to do it is not unreasonable to expect that, given plenty of notice, time should be made available.

Wisker (2001) advises that students decide on a number of issues before a meeting takes place:

- What questions need to be looked at.
- What problems there are.
- What can be asked from these problems.
- What outcomes are hoped for (e.g., in terms of supervision).

Beatty (2001) advocates that:

- Meetings are frequent in the beginning.
- A time schedule is written and continually referred to.
- Ideas must be on paper before each meeting.
- Sometimes backward progress is necessary.
- Good, open interaction at the meetings is critical.
- After the meetings, students must write up where they are in their thinking.

Written work: In most cases, written work should be submitted prior to a meeting so as to form the basis for discussion; such meetings should then provide the students with time enough to discuss different aspects of their work. The advantage of submitting written work is that it forces the PhD students to commit their thoughts in writing, which is not always easy, as these thoughts may not have been well conceptualized. As the French author Boileau said, "What is clearly conceived is also easily put down on paper". It should be clear that in order to be useful a written work should not be an early draft. One common complaint of reviewers thus relates to how little care researchers have taken with their work. In fact, reviewers often send poorly written papers back to the track chairs or editors asking why they wasted their time. Students, who present poorly structured work, will either frustrate their supervisors or waste the supervisors' valuable time on mundane issues such as trying to sort out what the students mean, rather than gaining the supervisors' advice on important theoretical and methodological issues. Students should therefore plan for periods where they will proof their work and, more importantly, distance themselves from it and then re-read it to see if there are further improvements that can be made. However, students should not try to write the perfect document with endless footnotes to cover every minor point. All theses have limitations, and students should learn to accept this rather than attempting to cover all possible objections.

Supervision: A student with an interest in starting on a PhD program could meet with students who have earlier studied, or are currently studying with, the supervisor (Beatty, 2001). What do these students think of the supervisor and his personality? A good supervisor should be ready to establish such contacts with former or current students. Students should realize, however, that what they hear from former or current students is not objective. Potential students should also look at PhD completion rates, and successful PhD completions of their potential supervisor. Choosing the nicest person is not always the most effective strategy in the long-term!

What is best for one student is not necessarily the best for another student. It all depends on the particular student's personal abilities and personality. Beatty (2001: p. 208) actually recommends that supervisors "read their students' needs and be flexible in their styles" and accommodate to such different issues as the following ones:

- What kind of feedback should be given and when?
- How much give and take will there be in the relationship?

- How much will the supervisor aid in helping the student get funding or data sources for the dissertation?
- How will journal authorship be handled?
- Will the supervisor need to be available to help both before and after the dissertation is complete?
- How available will the supervisor be?
- Can the supervisor expect authorship on articles from the dissertation and what will be their role in preparing these articles?

For example, independent students may prefer a supervisor who allows them to try out different ideas; such students would find it very difficult to work with supervisors who like to be more in command of what is happening. Other students may need such stricter guidance, though. Good supervisors will know which style is more appropriate with a particular student. Some students come as experienced researchers and require little by way of supervision, whereas others require significant assistance and guidance in the early stages of their dissertation. Ultimately, though, the work must be the student's own and, as such, the students must be prepared to work in an independent manner. Supervisors often have little time, and can be put off supervision if they believe they have to effectively be a coauthor in the final document. This also means that the supervisor should not dictate everything that the student needs to do; Cryer (2000) states that a good supervisor actually will seek to form independent students. However, at the beginning of their research career students can work with their supervisors on a smaller research project and get to know how to undertake research.

If supervisors are not satisfied with the students and their research they should say so. The students, for their part, should set out their expectations of the supervisors up front. Students should also be so excited about their work that they will "get out of bed early on a wet Monday morning" and "work on it on Friday evening" (Blaxter, Hughes, Tight 1996: 23). Moreover, students must be able to surprise the supervisors. One of the authors' supervisors used to say, "As long as I see your eyes shining while you present your work I know that you are on the right track".

Lack of supervision: Sometimes, the students do not receive the supervision that could reasonably be expected. For example, students and supervisors are increasingly moving between different countries and this means that it is likely that students face problems due to communication barriers. This can be because of ethnic group, age, class, and gender (Cryer, 2000). Supervisors with religious or cultural affiliations may refuse to comment on a research

paper that deals with a particular industry such as the pork or beef meat industry. Students must be aware of such barriers and, if present, try to work around them.

Rules of engagement: Ideally, the supervisor and the student should sit down and work out a kind of a contract that will details the rules of engagement. This should build upon the fact that there should be clear and open communication between the two parties (Wisker, 2001). A contract should spell out the roles and responsibilities of the supervisor and the student, as both have a role to play, and responsibilities to bear. This is evidenced in the following example of one rules of engagement:<sup>7</sup> The supervisor expects that the student be:

- On time for meetings.
- Prepared.
- Takes the initiative to look for solutions to problems and use the supervisor to help evaluate alternative solutions.
- Always meets the deadlines.
- Keeps in touch.
- Has the ability to apply knowledge, conceptual thinking, problem solving, and technical competence (e.g., software).
- Is competent to carry out research that can be published in good journals, and can communicate these findings.

The supervisor must:

- Be on time for meetings.
- Guide the student through the process, e.g. to offer advice, constructive criticism, and to be prepared to bounce ideas.
- Read the student's drafts before scheduled meetings.
- Give timely feedback: as a guide, the supervisor should take about one or two weeks to review the literature chapter, but the timing of the feedback should be between the student and the supervisor.
- Ensure the smooth administration of the process: that is, the process includes the selection of the external examiner, as well filling as in the forms required for external examination.

The contract should also specify who owns the intellectual property. Many universities in the United Kingdom nowadays have clauses, which give them property rights in the student's work; again this seems to differ between countries, as this is not the case for Danish universities. A related point is the use of the supervisor's name in publications, and the rules surrounding publication. Some supervisors have a significant impact on the students' work,

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<sup>7</sup> This list appears in the student guidelines from the University of Auckland and the Auckland University of Technology and is standard practice in Australian universities.

and recognizing their role through authorship on papers is one way of rewarding their efforts. However, students should also be prepared to limit the context to which authorship applies. It would thus seem unreasonable to expect a co-authorship for an extension of the original PhD thesis or research that is unrelated to the thesis. Students should consult their supervisors over any publications submitted from the PhD if they put their names on these publications. One of the authors' supervisors was horrified to find one of his students submitting poor quality papers with his name on them to local conferences. Overall, students are strongly advised to consult their supervisors prior to sending off any article. Writing scientific articles can be hard work, and since the supervisors have written articles before they are able to offer good advice.

Experienced and less experienced supervisors: It should be appreciated that supervisors who have been around for a long time often have less time than the supervisors who have just started to work in academia. Being more experienced, the established supervisors can perhaps give more precise advice, whilst the novice supervisors can afford more time for the supervision process. Having both an experienced and a novice supervisor is probably the best world for the student. Note also that supervisors making comments on students' work expect them to be taken seriously. Supervisors have a strong background in research and in the supervision process, and aim to give students advice on how best to assist them achieve a reasonable research outcome, and on how best to meet the requirements of a PhD program. One author wrote what he believed to be an excellent chapter laying the historical context of the industry he studied. While he could argue that this was important, the length of the chapter (150 pages) was unnecessary and would make it difficult to find markers for the thesis. While the author thought everything in the chapter was interesting and fundamental the supervisor advised to make heavy cuts, but to retain the original work as the basis of a book.

### ***To be available when needed***

At times, the students may experience that the supervisors have little time. This could be because the supervisors have too many students to supervise, or because they have too much administration to do. Students should be aware of this, and also check out how supervisors are managing their research groups. Are the group's research members meeting, discussing, and working together, or are they each isolated in an ivory tower? Although it should be normal procedure that formal meetings are planned for students should have the possibility of meeting their supervisors outside of these meetings to clarify straightforward issues.

*To be open, supportive, reliable, trustworthy, clear in the relationships, and friendly*

Supportive supervisor: Although open and clear communication is important the supervisors should put their messages across in a manner that can be viewed as supportive. For a period of three years (full-time program) or five years (part-time program) the PhD program becomes the most important thing in the students' lives, and this means that criticism, intended as helpful to the students, can actually cause a nervous breakdown instead! "Nothing is right", such students seem to think. However, it is an important learning point of the PhD process that students appreciate that critique of their research is meant positively and will only improve the quality of the research. Indeed, students will continue to be challenged when they submit articles for academic journals.

Friendly supervisor: Students want their supervisors to be friendly, but they must realize that the supervisors also want to be surrounded with friendly students! Supervisors are human beings who are often under pressure and overworked, and they may be inexperienced or feel shy or embarrassed at rejecting an idea from a student who could even become a colleague with a track record of publications (Cryer, 2000). In such cases a student should find a way forward to deal with the supervisor that is sensitive and which works for the supervisor. For example, some supervisors prefer to give written feedback instead of verbally in meetings. Appreciation of the supervisor's advice and a thank-you-very-much can also improve the way a relationship works between a supervisor and student.

It is important that a student can get along with a supervisor but this does not necessarily mean that they need to become best of friends (Wisker, 2001). It is fine when it happens, of course. One of the authors did his master's degree back in 1991. As part of this research project he had to run some experiments at an overseas research station. It was important that the supervisor took part in these experiments but since he suffers from an eye disease the overseas trip needed extra planning. The author was invited to his supervisor's home for a meal and to hear about he should watch out for the supervisor. This visit turned out to be the first among many visits, and the author and the supervisor have become good friends; the supervisor also later served as a member of the PhD thesis committee.

### *To be constructively critical*

Skills of analysis and criticism: Students need to hear what is good about their research, and what is less good so that they can improve the quality of the research. In this way the PhD process becomes about developing research skills and creating knowledge. One part of the learning that takes place and which is both essential and constituent is to develop skills of analysis and criticism. Indeed, this is an integral part of the academic process. For example, each time we read a journal paper, listen to a presentation, or present our own work we are making constructive judgments. Do we agree with the line of argument that is put forward? Do the conclusions follow from the analysis? Are the claims for generalization justified on the basis of the work that is presented? With practice, gained as part of completing a PhD, we learn to critically evaluate the work of others. It should come as no great surprise, then, if others in turn criticize us (indeed constructive criticism is far better than empty praise). Being able to deal with criticism and argue for a point of view is an essential skill to be developed. It is for this reason that the *viva voce* is sometimes referred to as a defense. Peers examine the PhD students in order to test their understanding and ability to sustain a line of argument. This critical aspect of academia is formalized by the use of referees in the conference and journal review process, and the debate that takes place at conferences where work-in-progress papers are presented specifically in order to be criticized and to receive the feedback of others.

Academic criticism: One of the authors can still recollect with absolute clarity the first academic conference that he attended. The opening, plenary session took place in the large hall of a venerable and prestigious university. After the opening address the chairman invited questions and, at this point, a professor with a worldwide reputation in the subject stood up and made a blistering attack on the speaker. The author was shocked not only at the very direct comments that he made but also with the obvious vehemence and aggression that he was personally expressing. It was quite apparent that he fundamentally disagreed with the speaker and that this was not just a matter of opinion as far as he was concerned, but one of inherent belief that seemed to represent almost a religious conviction. The author sat, literally, with his mouth open as the argument took place in front of hundreds of people in the audience. When the author was discussing this with another delegate afterwards and commenting on his surprise at what he had seen and heard, this rather more experienced conference-goer just laughed and said that this was rather mild compared to the exchange that had taken place at another conference last year! This taught the author that criticism is an

everyday part of academic life and that criticism of one's work, and perhaps one's point of view, is not a personal criticism. However such criticism needs to be focused around the issues, appraising, and objective and to suggest alternatives and options for it to be of real value and use to PhD students. Generalized statements such as 'read more' or 'write more concisely' whilst perhaps accurate may not be helpful.

### ***To have a good knowledge of their research area***

Knowledge of research area: Students can expect a supervisor to have at least some knowledge in the area that they have chosen as their specialist area. This may relate to the area of interest, the methodology employed, or the context of study. In order to check whether or not this is indeed the case students can check on the Internet; what have potential supervisors published, and with whom. Research publications from a potential supervisor are often listed on the university's Web site. All of these things give an indication of whether or not a supervisor is familiar with the latest readings, contacts, and ideas. For example, one of the authors conducted his PhD research in the wine industry. His supervisor was a recognized expert in this field, as well as having a strong background in strategic management, but having less expertise in qualitative methods. In cases where students require a supervisory board they may be able to cover the theoretical, methodological, and contextual bases by carefully selecting the composition of the board. For example, another of the authors chose the committee members in such a way that there would be a specialist in most of the areas that the PhD research covered.

Good supervisors can help their students by suggesting some of the founding literature in the area and assisting the students to identify a researchable gap. However, this is not to imply that it is either a rapid or easy process. The literature review may well demonstrate that there are a number of different research traditions that recognize contrasting and, perhaps, conflicting concepts and use incompatible research methodologies. The experiences of three of the authors demonstrated that this was far from a linear process. Instead of concisely and economically reviewing the areas of the literature relevant to their initial research question, they found themselves moving from one area to another, as their research questions were changed and adapted in the light of their findings. They discussed this with their supervisors and expressed their regret at the time wasted in reviewing literature that was now not relevant. The supervisors responded by saying that this was actually the point of the literature review



and that the work that they had done had helped them to identify what was relevant by understanding what was not relevant. This issue may be particularly relevant for theory-building researchers, who often must complete a literature review as part of their course requirements, but then find that most of it is irrelevant given their findings.

Respect for supervisor: It should be that students respect their supervisors in terms of their scholarship, academic credibility, and practice. One of the author's supervisors was such a person. This person was known in the scientific community for his scholarship and, therefore, had the academic credibility to help the author moving forward in the PhD program. He was also involved in real-life marketing practice, which is why the author got to know marketing companies and to appreciate the kind of challenges that such companies are faced with. When students have such supervisors they become part of a much larger network of which the supervisor-student relationship is but a tiny part. This network is also important when the students will continue their research having finished their PhD programs. Of course this also depends on students' specific affinities and research topic. Some areas of research are more theoretical and, therefore, less prone to collaboration with private companies. In these circumstances, the supervisor's connections with companies are not critical.

Composition of thesis committee: It is worthwhile considering how well board members get on with one another, and how much respect they have for a diversity of views. It is no good having an expert in qualitative methods paired with an expert in the area of study, but fundamentally opposed to the use of qualitative methods. Although it would seem necessary that the first supervisor is an expert in the PhD topic it should still be appreciated that students can still receive an excellent supervision although the first supervisor has no expert knowledge provided that the student has access to such experts. It is often the case that additional supervisors are chosen for (Wisker, 2001):

- Expertise in methodology.
- Expertise in methods.
- Overall knowledge of university processes.

Since it is almost impossible to find a supervisor who has all of the qualities the single most important characteristic of an ideal supervisor-student relationship is that both parties are committed to the relationship's successful completion (Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight, 1996). The student should be ready to move to where the supervisor is – at least the student should spent

time at the supervisor's institution. Such a semester will be a valuable event. It may even be a requirement if the student wants to continue in the academic world. For example, one of the requirements for being hired as an academic staff member of the university where one of the authors did a PhD program was to spend at least six months at a foreign university. This was one of the reasons why this author went overseas during her PhD. Interestingly, although leaving one's country can be difficult most students do not regret their decision, and their market value increases significantly!

Contribution to knowledge: The test of a PhD is whether or not it makes a contribution to knowledge, and therefore the students preparing their thesis become an expert on that particular topic. This suggests that there is something of a journey to be traveled if the students are to develop this demanding standard of expertise. As academic research continues and, in particular, the means of disseminating that research expand, notably by the use of databases, the Internet, and other forms of technology, this suggests an almost infinite mountain of material to be analyzed and reviewed by the students. The supervisor has a very real role to play in helping the students to, firstly, really understand what it is they are interested in and trying to research, and, secondly, suggesting the areas of the literature that will help to position the research project. If a PhD thesis represents a contribution to knowledge then the students have to review the literature in order to find the metaphorical gap or hole into which their research can be positioned. These are to some extent parallel processes, as the students consider the potential opportunities for research, summarized by the research question, and the opportunity that exists within the literature to make a contribution.

### ***To structure tutorials so that ideas can be exchanged relatively easy***

At some universities there are so-called brown bag sessions where researchers get together, listen to a work-in-progress paper, and discuss the paper critically afterwards. Tutorials represent real 'quality time' with a supervisor and, therefore, deserve some preparation. A personal meeting with a supervisor is an excellent way of discussing one's work. A paper on an aspect of the work, or even just a set of summary notes, sent in advance of the meeting enables both the student and the supervisor to be prepared. Some students go to the extent of preparing minutes following a meeting with the supervisor. Whilst not very common this can be a good way of informing a number of different people who might be involved in one's PhD work of current progress. It can also sometimes be worthwhile to make use of seminars,

tutorials, and visiting speakers to participate in debate, compare and contrast views, and, perhaps, have the opportunity to present one's own work in a benign environment.

### ***To have sufficient interest in their research***

Encouragement: Supervisors should encourage their students to attend appropriate conferences, and to join scientific and/or professional organizations such as the *European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management* in Belgium, which arranges many specialized courses for PhD students, and the *Chartered Institute of Marketing* in the United Kingdom. They should also encourage their students to publish, especially because writing an article for publication can cause anxiety (Silverman, 1999).

Joint research: A student can learn a lot from doing joint research with the supervisor. For a moment let us consider the PhD model that is used in the natural sciences. Commonly we see a professor or senior researcher undertaking a research project within a well-defined area. PhD students can then be involved in subsets of the activity, with the work being coordinated within the umbrella of the project. This helps to develop a team approach with a community of students working to their own ends, but also in step with the overall objectives. If we contrast this to the social sciences the picture is often much more fragmented. Within a broad topic area there can be a number of discrete research activities, which, critically, can be undertaken using a number of different methodologies and philosophical perspectives. This means that it is important at the outset of the project to identify a potential supervisor working in the appropriate area and whose worldview or philosophical perspective is consistent with the student's own.

One of the authors was recently contacted by an eminent professor in a field similar to his own who asked if the author could arrange a series of meetings for the professor's PhD student to interview colleagues in the author's department. The author subsequently met the student at an academic conference at which she made a great impression via a rather nervous presentation. The author's colleagues tend to be very busy, and it is difficult enough for him to get to see them sometimes, let alone a PhD student from another university. However, feeling a sense of obligation, he undertook to arrange the meetings. Having engaged his own interest in her subject area, and armed with this knowledge, the author was then able to encourage his colleagues to meet her.

The thread that binds together the supervisor, the student, and others who can contribute to the PhD process is, of course, a common interest in the area, but more than that a passion and enthusiasm that is able to communicate itself and energize and motivate others. Students should seek to identify this interest and enthusiasm in their prospective supervisors, and to think carefully about how they can communicate this to others whose help they need.

***To be sufficiently involved in their success to help them get a good job***

Landing a job: Whilst PhD research may seem like an interminable process it does eventually end, even if forced to a conclusion by the end of the registration period. Whilst the pursuit of knowledge may be an end in itself most people undertaking a PhD have ambitions in sight. The supervisor can often be a catalyst in helping to fulfill those aspirations. Although good supervisors are interested in their students landing excellent jobs after completing their PhD programs most of them, however, do not have the possibility of actually offering them a job. A PhD is primarily an academic qualification and demonstrates competence for both teaching and research at a high level, but the commercial, public, or government sectors may also offer good opportunities.

Research after the PhD: The reputation of the university, the quality of the PhD itself, and the contacts and knowledge of the supervisor are important in taking that next step. In addition, the supervisor has a mentoring role to play in helping to develop a series of publications from the dissertation and – why not - to suggest additional research activities to undertake after completion, or at least encourage the student to start thinking about it at an early stage. The academic world, as with so many others, has its own series of networks and relationships and the advice and support of the supervisor can be very important in allowing the student access. This introduction to the network can be gradually undertaken over several years by the joint authorship of articles, conference attendance, presenting papers, and looking for opportunities to develop one's own network, perhaps by spending time at other universities in a visiting research or teaching role.

The presentation by one of the author's of his own work at a conference, which his supervisor suggested, resulted in a discussion with a professor from a university in another part of the world. This led to a fruitful research collaboration, which after completion of the PhD resulted in the author being invited to visit his university for a period of some months in order to

teach, write, and continue their mutual research activities. This has now grown into a major research initiative, which is being financially supported by the author's own university.

## **Conclusions**

Our article has reviewed the shopping list items that students must seriously consider when they find and choose their supervisors. Figure 1 summarizes many of those tasks that a supervisor will perform in the different stages of the supervisory process.

*[Take in Figure 1 about here]*

As the article has demonstrated, there are many items that are key. We realize that the demands of being a good supervisor are many, but we also believe that there are many supervisors out there who actually do a fantastic job. The many dedications in books to former supervisors/mentors bear witness to this. We certainly wish to thank our supervisors who have guided us over several years. Without them we would not have succeeded!

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After graduating in chemistry, engineering and physics, Dr. Adam Lindgreen finished an MSc in food science at the Technical University of Denmark and qualified as a European Engineer. Later, he finished an MBA at the University of Leicester (England) after which he worked as a consultant for Andersen Consulting. He then completed a PhD in relationship marketing at Cranfield University (England) – with 18 months as a visiting research fellow at the University of Auckland (New Zealand). Adam Lindgreen is now with Eindhoven University of Technology (the Netherlands) where he is also a research fellow with the Eindhoven Centre for Innovation Studies. Adam Lindgreen has carried out consulting work for a number of organizations, in Denmark and abroad. He has taught at numerous universities around the world, including England, France, New Zealand, and Russia. Adam Lindgreen is a visiting professor/reader with the Auckland University of Technology (New Zealand), Groupe HEC (France), Harper Adams University College (England), and Vladivostok State University (Russia). Adam Lindgreen has published in international marketing journals, including *Psychology & Marketing*, *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, *Qualitative Market Research*, *Journal on Chain and Network Science*, *Journal of Brand Management*, and *Journal on Relationship Marketing*. For his research, Adam Lindgreen has received three best paper awards at international marketing conferences. He is on the editorial advisory/review board of a number of journals, including *Journal on Chain and Network Science*, *Qualitative Market Research*, and *Børsen Ledelseshåndbøger*.

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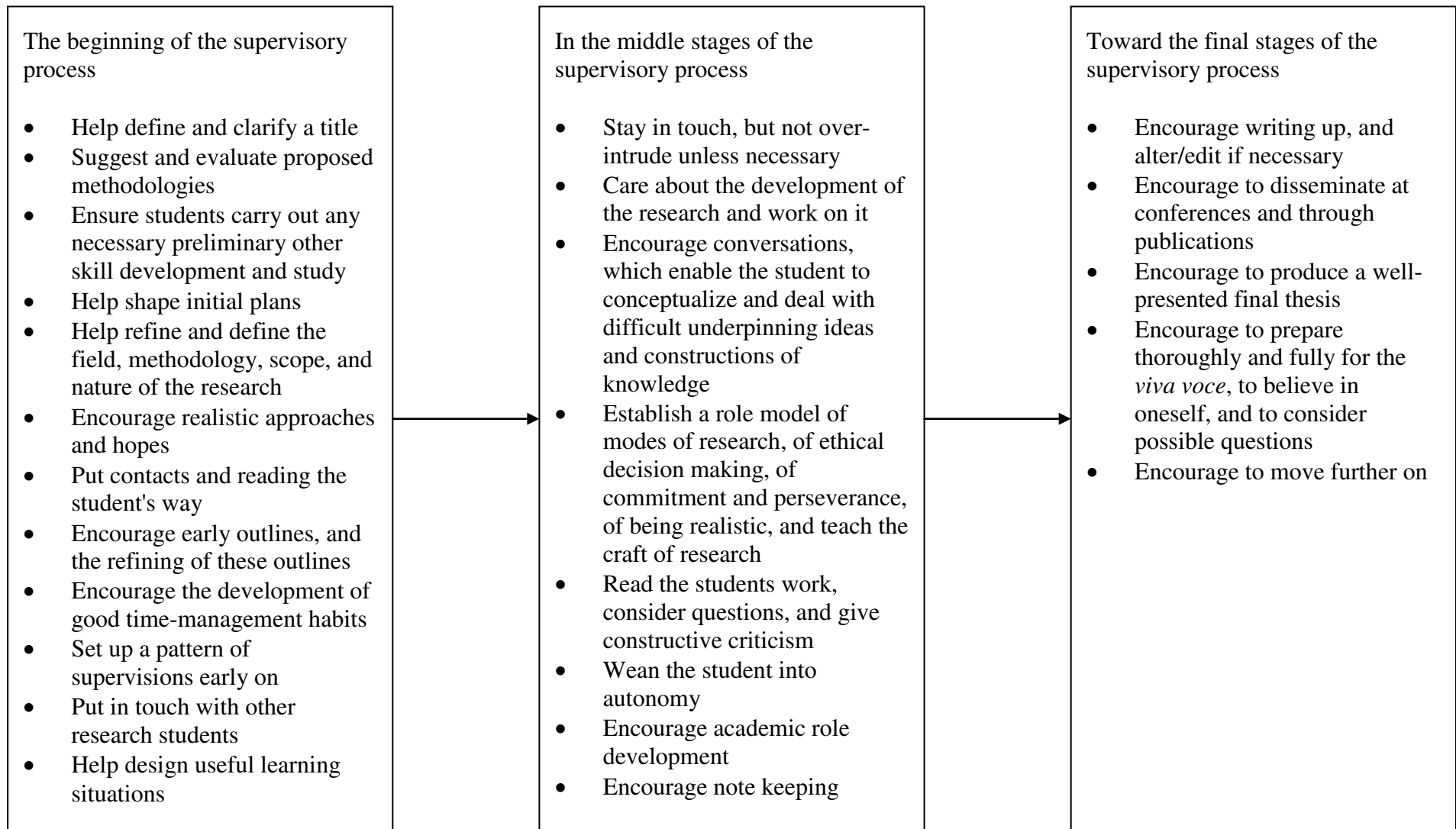
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His research interests include marketing strategy, personal selling, and luxury product marketing.



**Figure 1. The tasks that a supervisor will perform in the different stages of the supervisory process**

Source: Wisker, G. (2001), *The Postgraduate Research Handbook: Succeed with your MA, MPhil, EdD and PhD*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, pp. 39-40.

